Disguises: *PutUpYrHands*

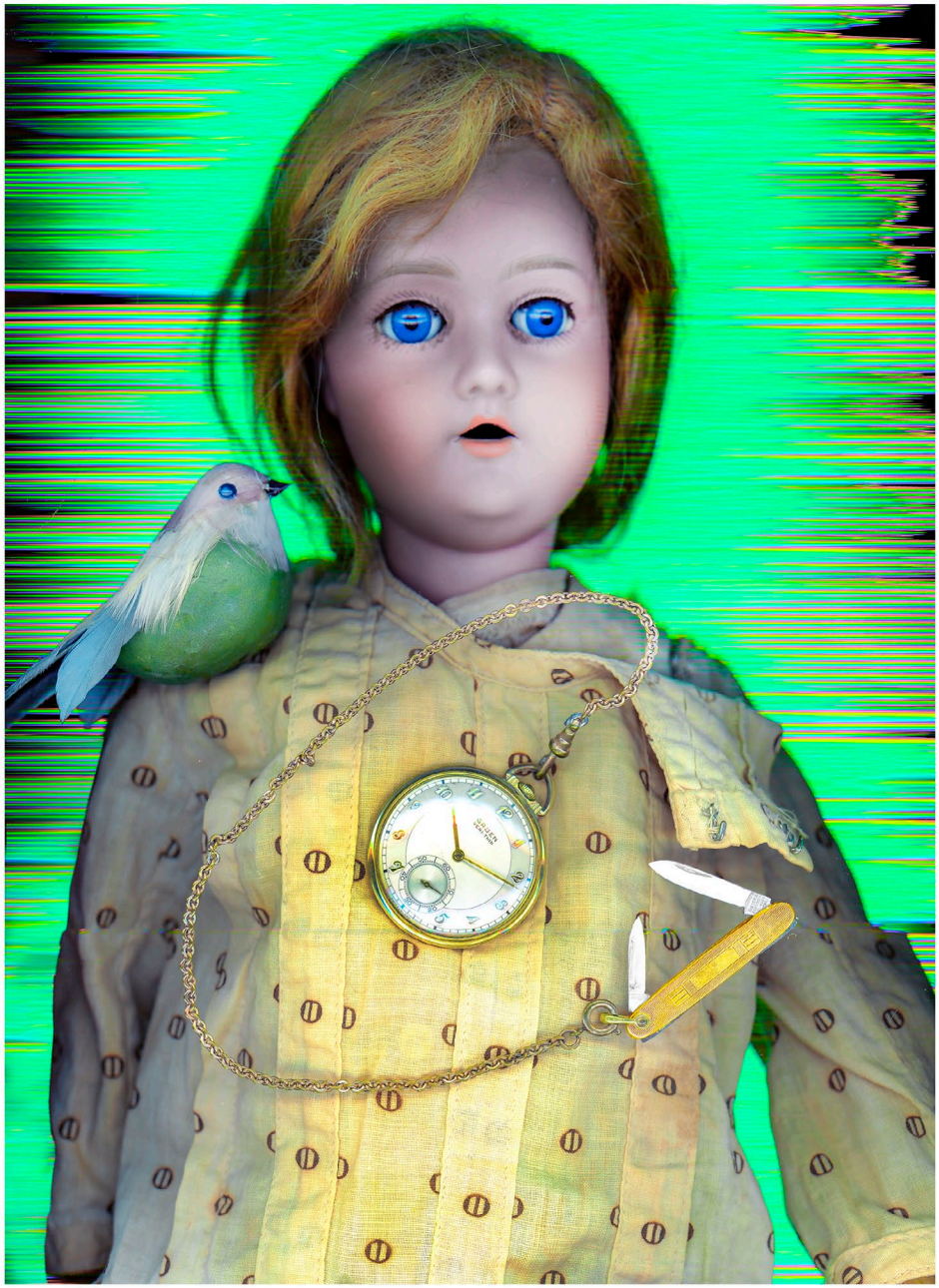
Peter Riggs Brown

Cover: *Teddy Smiles Colt38* @Peter Brown

Peter Brown's career has never followed a straight line. After graduating from the University of Hartford's Hartford Art School, with a BFA in 2D and 3D design, he leaned into his sculptural side and worked in construction before pivoting to commercial advertising photography. He apprenticed under two Hartford-area photographers for five years, then co-founded Woodruff/Brown Photography with John Woodruff in 1985. Today he's still at it, shooting high-end architectural projects for clients who need their buildings to look as good on paper as they do in person. Alongside his commercial work, Brown has spent years building furniture and, more recently, creating sculptural wall hangings made from repurposed and found materials. By any measure, it looked like a life well-constructed — purposeful, creative, rooted in a corner of Connecticut where not much disturbs the peace.

Except that calm is not a promise. It's just the silence between moments.

In 2013, Brown became the victim of an armed home invasion — a single night that changed things permanently. What he's made in response is haunting, deeply personal, and impossible to look away from. Quite opposite from the polished conventions of his commercial work, these images feel chaotic, harsh, claustrophobic, isolating. Drawing on decades of technical expertise and an artist's willingness to reach for emotional depth, Brown combines straight and alt- techniques, including pinhole and scanography, to respond to the crime. His large-format images are both personal and political, often nightmarish, and always quietly unforgettable, haunting reminders that safety in suburban life is assumed, not guaranteed.



LITCHFIELD - It was chance that [redacted] spotted Peter Brown driving toward home along Interstate 84 near Hartford, police said – chance, and bad luck for Brown, who would find himself the victim of three thugs who hatched a plan in prison to rob from the rich.

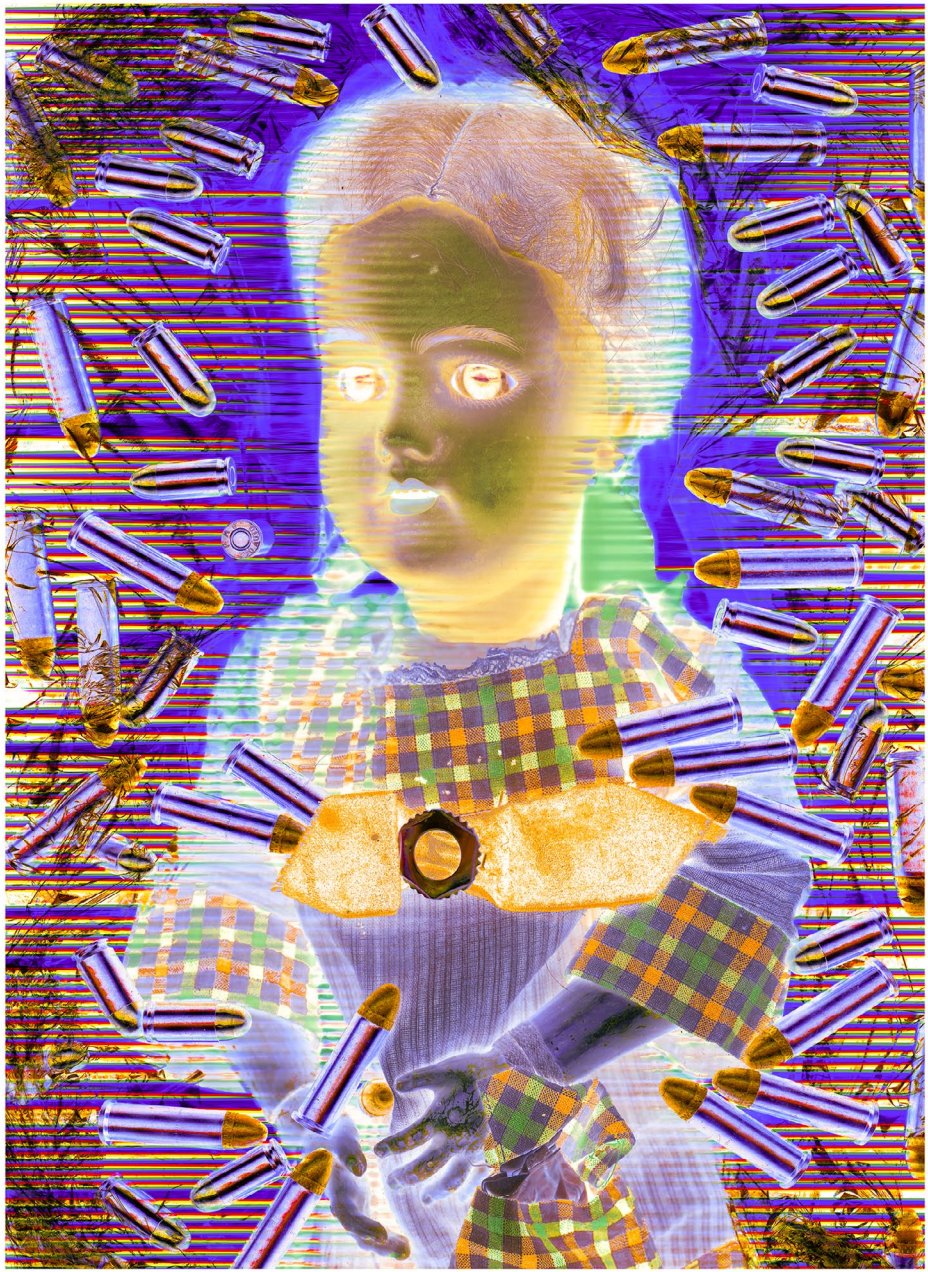
Disguise–Doll 1_Gold Watch_Bird_Green

Kodak PORTRA 160 4141

The plot started over meals shared at Garner Correctional Institution in Newtown, where inmates [redacted], of East Hartford, and [redacted] and [redacted], both of Hartford, would stew over their situation, according to a 15-page warrant for [redacted]'s arrest. Their complaints over lunch had developed into plans by February, police said.

"They started talking about robbing people," [redacted] later told police, according to the warrant. "They started talking more and more about it... Originally, they planned to rob a couple because couples have more money."

Disguise–TeddySmiles Colt38



All three were out of prison by early April when they met again.

[redacted] bought a Super Mario Brothers costume to cover his face, police said. They bought gloves at a Home Depot, and plastic zip ties. Armed with plastic firearms, they rented a car and headed out to search Hartford's highways for victims.

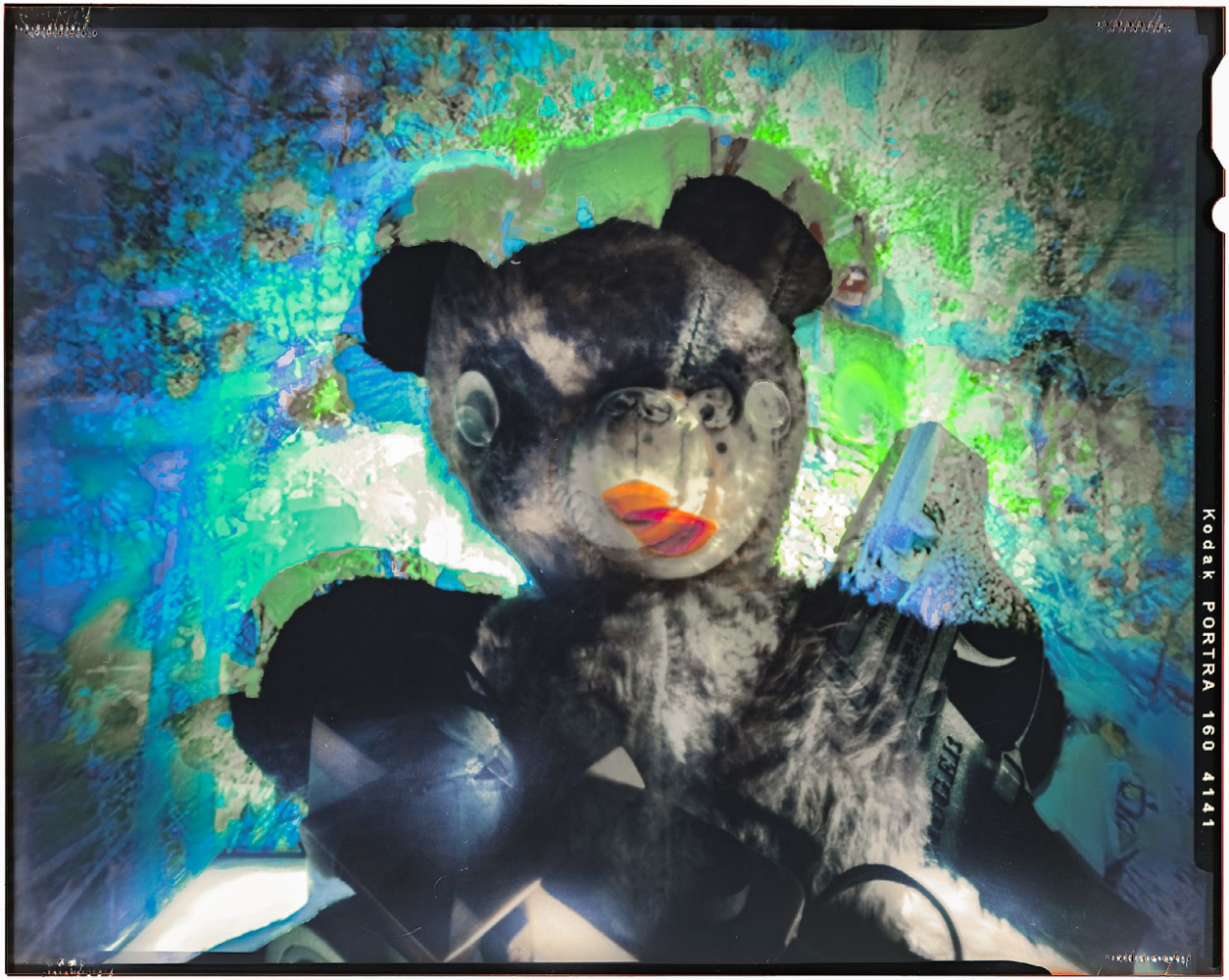
They saw Brown's BMW X5.

He was driving home to New Hartford from Boston. He reached Hartford just before midnight April 7.

Kodak PORTRA 160 4141

The trio of convicts suspected an older man in a "Beemer" might be retired and have money, court documents said. They followed him into New Hartford, about 20 miles.

Brown pulled into the driveway of his home, a two-bedroom, 1400 square-foot white vinyl-sided house, circa 1836, that sits on a 0.4-acre lot on [redacted] Street.


Kodak PORTRA 160 4141

[redacted] parked along the road, police said. The two others, dressed in dark clothes and wearing handkerchiefs and scarves to cover their faces, pulled out their plastic guns and pointed them at Brown.

Kodak PORTRA 160 4141

"Give us your money," they demanded. Brown turned over his wallet, which held $30, police said.

Put up hands Mario background

The robbers demanded the pin number to his ATM card.

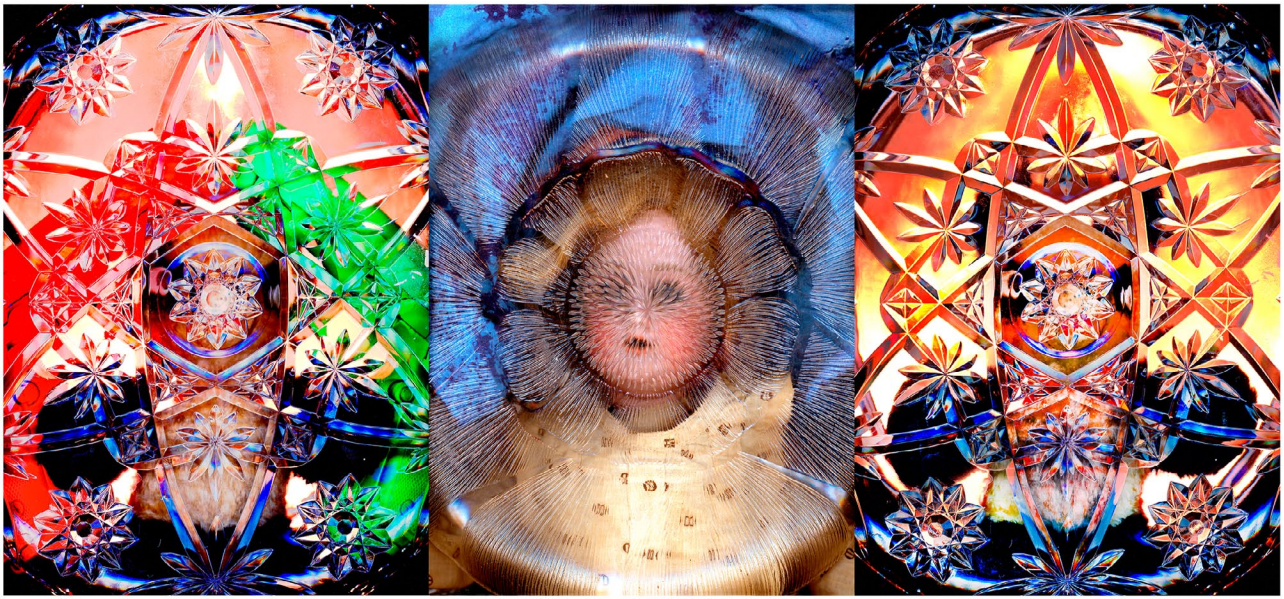
"Come on, you drive an X5, you have a big house, you got to have more money inside," one of them said, according to the warrant. They asked if Brown had a safe.

One of the men accompanied Brown to an ATM after threatening to harm him if he gave the wrong number.

Kermit Rusted Pistol

Kodak PORTRA 160 4141

The robbers withdrew $1,300 in cash and tossed the bank card in the sewer, police said. Another ripped the phone from the wall of his home and searched his briefcase.



Brown was allowed to go free. He asked his neighbor to call police.

Video images taken from the ATM and coin machine helped police identify the three men.

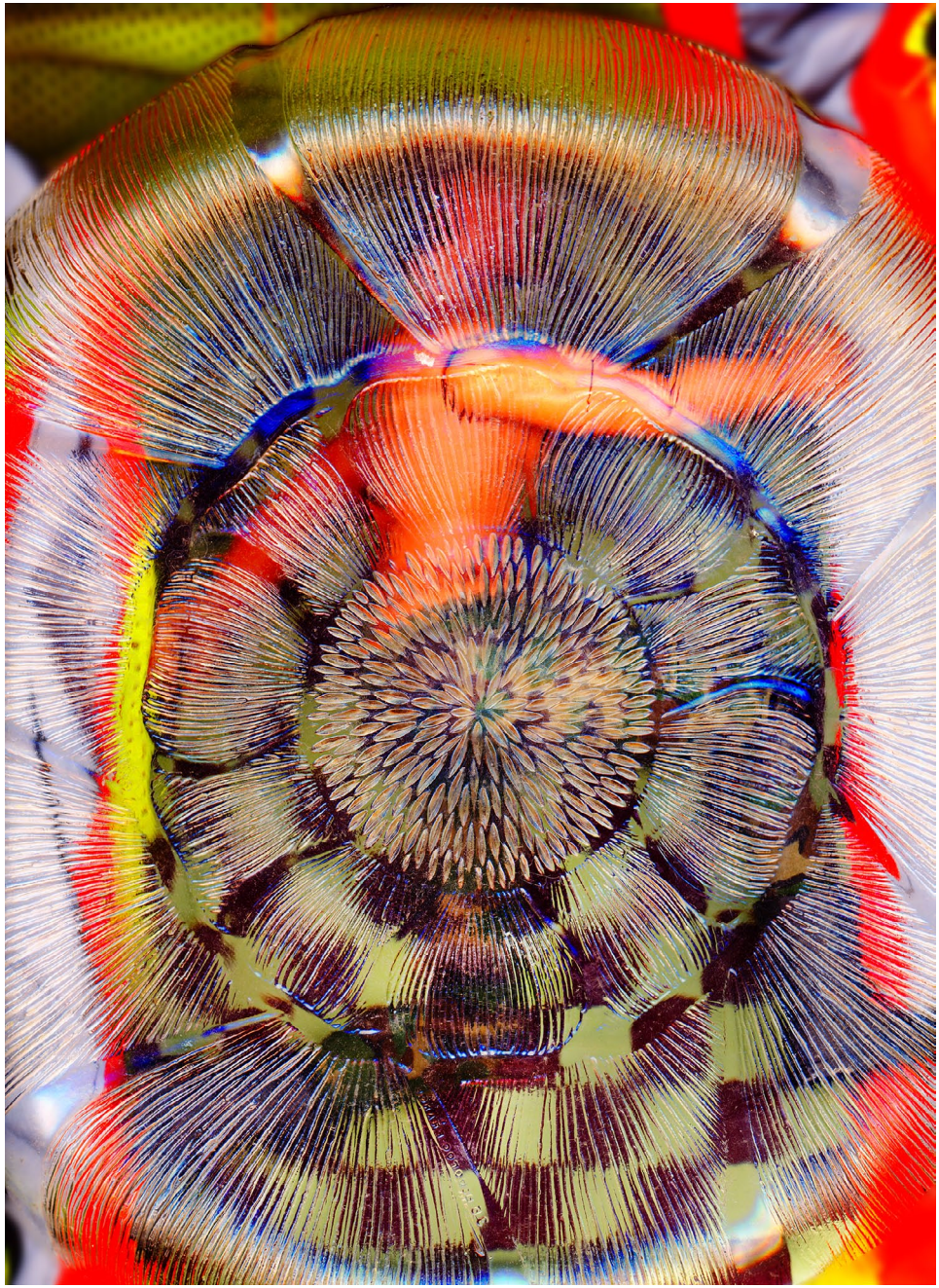
[redacted] denied doing anything wrong, police said.

Kodak PORTRA 160 4141

[redacted] was charged Friday and arraigned in Litchfield Superior Court, where he was ordered held on $900,000 bond on home invasion and other charges.

Judge [redacted] denied a request by Public Defender [redacted] to reduce the bond to less than $500,000, an amount that would have allowed [redacted] certain privileges behind bars. [redacted] has a history of weapons offenses, but was in prison on domestic violence charges, authorities said.

[redacted]'s case was continued until Sept. 20. In addition to the home invasion charge, he also faces kidnapping, threatening, robbery and larceny counts.



Police are looking for [redacted] and [redacted].

Caution

What a story! Isn't northwest Connecticut supposed to be quiet? Has the home invasion changed your security routine?

Officially, the northeast area is considered the Quiet Corner, but I'd like to believe the Northwest areas come a close second, compared to the chaotic, nearer to New York City, southern sections. And yes, I've now been locking my exterior doors religiously and always keep an exterior light glowing at night.

Peter Riggs Brown

When did you realize that art-making was going to be your way of processing the trauma?

I guess you could say that, after all those Covid years, stuck in semi-isolation for the most part, I began my continuation with art and somehow started slowly thinking, then doing and making works about the event.

Your work incorporates teddy bears, household objects, revolvers and ammo — things that are simultaneously familiar and unsettling. How did you arrive at those specific objects, and what the symbols mean to you?

It's funny, I've usually photographed scenes, objects, abstractions without the human presence, but I wanted to use the human form for this adventure. Whenever I see images posted in the photo journals, magazines, galleries, etc. (I'm going to get blowback for this), all the imagery looks the same to me, same this, same that — I felt the dolls, teddy bears added an edgy twist for me joining the people picture club. All the other objects chosen by me for inclusion are metaphors for various elements from that crime, stolen objects, etc.

I would surely have PTSD after an experience like yours! How accurately does that label describe your own experience? How has your perception changed the past ten plus years?

The anxiety, apprehension and memories from that night are slowly fading, but occasionally, and sometimes vividly, reappear.

Back to the beginning. How did your art life begin. The origin story — background, first years, school days?

I did attend the Hartford Art School, and at that time it was very progressive, a non-traditional, radical experimental place that just dumbfounded my naive senses. But after months of soaking it all in, I began to see how this radical environment was drawing me in — I loved the experiences there. I enjoyed both sculpture and photography, then after graduating, I started working as a residential framer for a small construction company, but always thought of a photography career. Opportunity knocked and I then became a photo assistant to a local commercial photographer, then

eventually partnered up with an acquaintance and we formed our own photo studio. Although the studio became very busy and well-known over the years, it unfortunately took up all my time. So I never really pursued my fine art dreams, until about eight years ago or so. The art world was beckoning me with some unknown force.

Any pivotal experiences, eureka moments, or epiphanies early on that helped to seal the deal?

My first "boss" showed me how to process E-6 film (transparency, slide film) just once. He then handed me 6 rolls of Ektachrome and left the darkroom. I was alone and scared shitless, pulled it off with success. I then was confident enough to label myself a real photographer. Ha!

What the rest of your training? Your work beautifully combines concept and craft. How did you get to be so good?

I learned about using cameras by just doing. and doing, and doing. The assistant years were amazing. Using several camera formats, day in and day out, taught me so much about 35, 120, 4x5 and 8x10 systems. We shot B&W, color transparency, color negative, and Kodalith high contrast films, and printed B&W and color. We did it all and processed everything ourselves.

What's that concept? Spend 10,000 hours doing anything and you'll likely get good at it? Ha, guess I've joined that club! Just spend a whole lot of time among fellow artists, and view as much art as possible — you'll be rewarded.

When did you close in on photography as your specialization?

I think it was just a slow, organic path for me. Both my grandfathers and my dad enjoyed picture taking, so I was exposed to photography all my life.

Artists seem to absorb inspiration from the air, but most can name other artists who have meant the most. Yours?

So, here's my list of the photographers I've admired and was/am inspired by, in no particular order: Sandy Skoglund, Ezra Stoller, David Levinthal, Laurie Simmons, Joel-Peter Witkin, Ellen Carey, John Pfahl, Cindy Sherman, Jim Rohan, Elliot Porter, Duane Michels, and a former HAS teacher, Heidi Katz.

Is there an individual, cadre, or collective to whom you present new work? A source for useful, confirming editorial advice?

The work I do usually is not seen by anyone until I think it's finished, and I don't seek out advice or opinions during the process.

Part of the fun is creating, another part is seeing the reactions. How have the other reviews been for this series?

Most everything I've heard from others is positive, even though the word "creepy" has been thrown around. I'll take it, and I'm just thankful for my acceptance in the art world.

What is it about your work that draws people in? As you refine each work, what are you looking for? What makes a project "work?"

I really don't know or have an answer. Several times, I've revisited a piece and altered colors, layers, etc. Not sure if they're ever finished. I may see a "final" print and say I should have done this or that. The wow factor always intrigues me, as so much imagery is just the same ol', same ol', rehashed work.

What does your production workflow look like? Advance planning? Winging it? A combination?

Creativity, concepts, ideas for me just organically materialize as I work and form the imagery. I may scan a setup a dozen or more times until I am pleased. Then, off to Photoshop and

that's where I beat the images to death with whatever and however they evolve. The pinhole work is much more time consuming as I can't actually view/see what I'm composing. Just very educated guesses from doing so many setups. Then it's a waiting game for the film processing, then scanning, then reshooting if something isn't jelling for me. Then, repeat the whole process....

You were there for the beginning and growth of digital cameras and computer tools. When did you yield to temptation?

There were several commercial and business factors that caused our shift to digital technology. In the early 2000s, Kodak and Fuji were discontinuing the films we used, Polaroid was quickly changing with rumors of going out of business, and the digital cameras/software weren't quite good enough. But then reality set in and most of our analog camera gear was sold to purchase the first digital camera system, Canon EOS cameras with tilt/shift lenses to allow the perspective controls from view cameras.

Your current kit includes a lot of "unconventional" equipment. Run through your inventory for us?

I use my Canon 5DsR and various lenses for work, but, during the pandemic, I started diving into the pinhole medium, using an old Linhoff KardanB 4x5 view camera retrofitted with a very crude aluminum foil pinhole lens. That led me to purchase a baltic birch pinhole camera from B&H, then bought several brass, laser cut pinhole "lenses" from France. I use my Epson Perfection V850 Pro flatbed scanner to produce some of the artwork materials for my diorama setups. Then I started experimenting and using the scanner as my "camera." Absolutely loved the results, so I've been creating imagery on the scanner ever since.

Lighting wise, I use LED spot and panel lights, with some very recent small spot lights designed for macro work. I do own several electronic flash systems but haven't really used these in my artworks, just my commercial photography. Oh, almost forgot, I've also used that stupid machine in all of our pockets, the iPhone.

You've taken experimental photography, pinhole and scanner art up a notch. How did you get started? A happy accident?

I purchased the scanner initially to scan my 4x5 color negatives from my pinhole *Bridge* series. Those photos and many

other images, are viewable on my website, organized by series: https://www.peterbrownphotos.com.

Then I started using the high end scanner to reproduce line drawings and doodles for resizing, then printing, then incorporating these somehow into the dioramas. I started actually scanning objects, gold watch, toy guns, etc to again make prints, resize them, then place amongst my figures in the dioramas.

One day I took one of my doll subjects and just placed it on the flatbed and wanted to see how it scanned as an object. I was blown away at the reproduction. The flood gates opened and I started to scan, scan, scan, experimenting with backgrounds, lights....

For those who might want to make scanography part of their practice, any tips? Tricks of the trade?

Think of the final image in reverse, the closest up front objects are placed first on the scanner, with layers added and a background — most people just scan something without thoughts of backgrounds. My backgrounds are either fabrics, colored papers, or pure light from various light sources, sometimes with color gels.

I scan at very high resolutions which allows significant enlargement. A few images were reproduced on a Canon 60" Inkjet printer, final sizes were seven feet high by five feet wide, with stunning sharpness. These high-res scans also take up to 10 minutes or so to scan. The bottom line is that, with trial and error, and patience, anyone can use their home scanner to create a "photographic" image. To me they are still photographs, it's just a different device to replicate an image. Also, using the scanner is limiting in many ways — the

scanner bed is nine by 12 inches, and it stays horizontally in place in use. No picking it up for portraits! I'm also very careful not to scratch the glass surface!!

You mentioned the iPhone. What role do the Internet and social media play in your practice?

I am absolutely guilty of internet scrolling. Seems addictive at times.

Generative A.I. in the big thing on the horizon. Any interest in including it in your work or...?

I try to avoid using AI as much as possible.

What's next? Is there an image or project underway or in planning now? Plans for a show(s)? A book? Is there anything we can help you advertise?

These past couple of years I've been volunteering my architectural skills to photograph art exhibitions throughout the state at museums, and galleries, for the artist involved, the curators and, of course, the institutions. I have to say it's been very rewarding to help these people. I haven't taught, although as my commercial years may be winding down a bit, that may be an opportunity. I was invited to be a sole juror for a photo exhibit at the ALNB, Art League of New Britain. It was a fun experience viewing some very good work.

Lately I was notified that I've been included in a group juried show at The Florence Griswold Museum in Lyme, Connecticut, for their *Patchwork* exhibition re: the upcoming 250th anniversary of the USofA celebrations.

As far as my own future art, not sure where that path leads.

Links

https://www.peterbrownphotos.com
https://www.instagram.com/peterbrown831/
peterrbrown@yahoo.com
POB 58, Pine Meadow, CT

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